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WORK + SPACE

Sime Darby Group CEO
Datuk Jeffri Salim Davidson on
Futures Made Better, published
to celebrate the company's
110th anniversary



DATUK JEFFRI SALIM DAVIDSON

Sime Darby Group CEO Datuk Jeffri Salim Davidson on commemorative coffee table book *Futures Made Better*, published in conjunction with the conglomerate's 110th anniversary



Options: Congratulations on the book! Tell us more about it.

Datuk Jeffri Salim Davidson: This 110th anniversary is a very meaningful celebration for us at Sime Darby. Looking back on our 110-year journey, we are proud to share how we have risen above the various challenges over the decades, and achieved various successes. We believe that in order to be sustainable and do even better in the future, we must appreciate the past and learn from experience.

This year has been challenging and has indeed been one of reflection, given the pandemic. There is much to learn and consider in how we should move forward. Reflecting on our own journey allows us to do that.

Some of our notable milestones include that in 2007, when the group merged with two other major Malaysian corporations — Kumpulan Guthrie Bhd and Golden Hope Plantations Bhd — to form the world's largest oil palm plantation company in terms of planted area, and Malaysia's leading diversified conglomerate with businesses in property development, the automotive industry, heavy equipment and engineering.

In 2017, the company evolved yet again, undergoing a transformation without precedent in Malaysia's corporate history, from a diversified conglomerate to three independent pure-play entities — Sime Darby Plantation Bhd, Sime Darby Property Bhd and Sime Darby Bhd, which consists of industrial, motors, logistics and healthcare businesses.

Today, Sime Darby Bhd is a lean, focused and driven multinational that continues to share a great deal of commonality with the Sime Darby of 1910, not just in terms of business but also its ethos — that pioneering spirit, a global mindset, the desire for growth and the ability to endure challenges and obstacles.

In the context of all these transformative changes, the publication of this book is timely: In these pages, we see how the early founders of Sime Darby were determined to succeed, exploring new industries and opportunities, and constantly innovating while always being anchored deeply in integrity, accountability and sustainability.

Can you share with us the process and journey of completing the book? How was it done especially with the Covid-19 limitations and how long did it take to complete?

The book was originally planned for 2010, when we reached our 100-year anniversary. However, circumstances at the time forced us to put it on the back-burner. As such, a lot of the research material had already been collected in 2010, such as the photos and interviews with our past leaders. It was a painstaking process of going through the archives and reaching out to the descendants of our founders and past leaders, for help.

We decided to restart the book this year, in line with our 110th anniversary. Of course, a lot has happened between 2010 and now, so the entire book was rewritten, with some new interviews added. It took us about a year to complete the book. To be quite honest, Covid-19 did not really impact its production.

In this day and age, everything can be done virtually. We held our interviews virtually, and all communications were conducted online.

What are your favourite parts of the book?

Personally, I was particularly taken by the historical portion of the book. As someone who has been with Sime Darby for the better part of my career, reading the historical bits brought about a sense of pride in how much we have achieved and how far we have come. To know that I will one day be a part of this history as the years pass and we grow and move forward ... is humbling. I hope that, like myself, many others will enjoy reading about the interesting historical facts about the company.

Sime Darby has achieved success after success throughout its 110 years of existence. What would you say is its most significant?

The fact that we are still standing strong after 110 years is a success in itself. We

From rubber and oil palm plantations to engineering, property development, heavy equipment, motor cars, hospitals, utilities and consumer goods trade — which was a company core business for many years — the breadth and scope of all these activities testify to the impact the name 'Sime Darby' has had on people in almost every walk of life. Three years ago, Sime Darby Bhd once again reinvented itself by making a decision to focus on the core businesses of industrial and motors, with healthcare being a growth area. Given the resilience and strength that we have shown, even during the black swan event we are facing now, I believe once again we have shown the adaptability and stability that is at the very core of who we are as an organisation.

Conversely, what would you say was the company's most challenging obstacles, and how was it overcome?

The only constant is change and we have evolved and adapted through the years. Some changes were brought about by necessity, like the move to palm oil from

rubber. Some, through circumstance, such as the independence of Malaya leading to Sime Darby ultimately becoming a Malaysian-owned entity. Some changes were brought about by mistakes, or failures, which forced us to be better, to rise above [the obstacle] and become even stronger. What has carried us through is the resilience of our group and our willingness to adapt. This is supported by a strong foundation of good governance.

Even in our earliest years when such terms were unheard of, Sime Darby was driven by a keen entrepreneurial spirit grounded in good governance and accountability that remain a core part of our culture and DNA today. For example, in the Seventies, we made a bold venture into China. The initial years were tough financially and operations-wise, but we stayed the course and today, China contributes more than 40% of our revenue. This ethos and resilience come from 110 years of experience, and are embodied in the people of Sime Darby Bhd today.

Sime Darby has been under some exceptional stewardship over the years. How has this shaped the company's development?

Undoubtedly, Sime Darby has been led by many great and capable leaders, including Tun Tan Siew Sin, Tun Ismail Ali and Tunku Tan Sri Ahmad Tunku Yahaya, who can all be credited to be behind the resolve that drove the development of the group, and shaped it to be the Sime Darby of today that stands strong as a regional multinational corporation. With extensive experience in the industries where we operate, our leaders have devoted their energy and dedication to ensuring that the group continues to play a leading role, both locally and globally. Their vision and foresight have contributed to the building of Sime Darby. The different styles and focus of each leader have contributed in differing ways, yet all have steered Sime Darby forward.

Given Sime Darby's illustrious journey, what can we expect in the years to come? As we celebrate our 110th anniversary this year, we are excited about the prospects of even greater progress in the coming years and look forward to celebrating many more achievements, together with our employees across the region and our stakeholders, and a more sustainable future. ■

— As told to Anandhi Gopinath



Some of the most interesting aspects of the book, and Jeffri's favourite, are the historical portions — this includes a list of the company's earliest members, alongside photographs of personalities like Tun Tan Siew Sin and Tun Abdul Razak, the second prime minister of Malaysia

started as a Malayan plantation business and today we are in 18 countries and territories with a focus on the automotive and industrial segments, and a mission to grow our healthcare business. Eighty-eight per cent of our business today comes from outside of Malaysia. This is no small feat and is what we are most proud of — the growth of a humble Malayan company into a global player.



- THE FIRST MEMBERS OF SIME, DARBY & CO**
- W.M. Sime
 - H. M. Darby
 - S. W. Moorhouse
 - A. Mackenzie
 - P. C. M. Watson
 - H. d'Esterre Darby
 - C. V. Beilby
 - J. M. Sime